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ABSTRACT

Intended as an examination of both the novel and the film, this study analyzes the themes and images of "Slaughterhouse-Five." The study is divided into three sections: a thematic analysis of the novel; an examination of the images and camera techniques in the film; and a discussion of similar themes in an effort to show how they are dealt with by the two media. The advantage of the thematic approach, as viewed in this study, is that it enables the educator to draw parallels between the methods used in each medium to develop a certain theme while retaining the aesthetic values of the work. (RB)

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Slaughterhouse-Five: The Novel and the Film

An Exemplum in the Teaching of Film and Literature

By Sandra Holtzman

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Introduction

The importance of keeping a discipline 'pure ' cannot be overemphasized. This means that one cannot apply the aesthetic values of literature, for instance, in the interpretation of cinema as well as the reverse. One looses the worth of a film by seeing a movie as though it were a book. In analyzing films and books together, the critic must necessarily forfeit some of the depth of each in order to accomplish a working perspective through which the audience can appreciate the works.

The following study operates on the level of themes and images in the novel and film, Slaughterhouse-Five. It examines thematic material first in relationship to the novel and then the film. The third part combines similar themes in both media. By directing the study to a thematic examination, the educator is ennabled to make a meaningful working relationship between the mediums with the least possible loss of aesthetic values in each.

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Slaughterhouse-Five Or The Children's Crusade
By Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

Slaughterhouse-Five Or The Children's Crusade, like a Tralfamadorian novel, is composed of numerous short passages, each containing an observation or message about the state of life. The arrangement of these passages appears to be haphazard with no "particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep."[1] Although the voice that is speaking is unidentified in the context of the passage, it's assumed to be Tralfamadorian. Precisely because the voice is anonymous, and because the structure of the novel fits the description, it is also Kurt Vonnegut Jr. speaking (this is also suggested in his subtitle to the novel). While the author's statement is factual (in relation to his work), the messages have been carefully chosen to deal with the same subjects: the silence of God, the brutality of war, the inevitability of death, and the meaninglessness of all three. Vonnegut's repetition of similar descriptive phrases in different contexts connects these subjects and intermingles the past, present and future in the book. After examining the individual passages, the reader sees the "image of life"[2] that Vonnegut is presenting: the idea that man, created in the image of God, commits the most heinous crimes (without retribution, because God doesn't care) for the best reasons and for the good of all. Because there is no "beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects"[3] in life (as well as in the novel), we shouldn't try to assign explanations to death (or anything else) because there are none. We should, rather, strive towards a world in which everything is beautiful and nothing hurts.

The reader first becomes cognizant of the God/war imagery through Vonnegut's juxtaposing of the subjects in the title of the novel and later in his explanatory quotes (of the title) throughout the book. A crusade was a religious war (or one supported by the state). By making one half of his title The Children's Crusade, Vonnegut implies that the other half, Slaughterhouse-Five (and, by extension, World War II) was part of a religious war fought by "foolish virtues... right at the end of childhood"[4]. Shortly after this statement, we are presented with a quoted passage about the ideals of the church contrasted with the actualities (enslavement and death) of the Children's Crusade. This quoted passage is followed by another on the fire-bombing of Dresden in 1760. Ironically, Vonnegut cites the passage describing "The Baptism of Christ" as being the painting most damaged by bombshell splinters. Within each illustration and between the two, Vonnegut juxtaposes descriptions of the war and the religious justification of it. The final passage in this chapter suggests that God is the archetypal war-maker. Here the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is described as a fire-bombing similar to that of Dresden (both in 1760 and World War II), in which the Lord rains "brimstone and fire"[5] upon the two cities. "Those were vile people in both of those cities, as is well known. The world was better off without them."[6] Thus war and destruction are acceptable to God and to man if we can justify them with a good cause. In Dresden, however, though the people are not vile and evil, they are destroyed just the same.[7]

The war/religion theme is again made apparent in Vonnegut's selection of the protagonist's surname-Pilgrim-and of his home town-Ilium. A pilgrim usually connotes a person who makes a religious journey to a sacred place,

although the trip is also more "to remember". Billy's army experience and his journey to Dresden can be thought of as his religious pilgrimage.[8] His other, more universal pilgrimage is the journey through his entire life. It is a physical as well as mental pilgrimage if one considers his time traveling to Tralfamadore a psychic experience. Billy's physical pilgrimage brings him back to his home town, Ilium.[9] Ilium was also known as Troy in ancient Greece. It was the site of the Iliad (the Trojan War)[10] then, and part of Billy's iliad now.[11]

Vonnegut has shown us a god that destroyed cities and then, later on in history, has allowed all kinds of atrocities to be committed, some in his name (eg, the Children's Crusade, the bombing of Dresden, Hiroshima, etc.). The god in Slaughterhouse-Five doesn't care. Eliot Rosewater tells Billy and the reader "that everything there was to know about life was in The Brothers Karamazov, by Feodor Dostoevsky."[12] Vonnegut is probably referring to the speeches in "The Grand Inquisitor" chapter, in which Ivan states his belief that men are evil and evil is allowed on earth because god doesn't care. "But that isn't enough any more," says Rosewater, "I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful new lies, or people just aren't going to want to go on living."[13] Vonnegut's point is that we can no longer trust others (like the Grand Inquisitor) to come up with lies for us to believe in; we now have to make our own explanations. Billy does this by re-interpreting his universe with the aid of Kilgore Trout's books. He is thus able to live with his memories of Dresden and death by inventing Tralfamadore and becoming "a maniac in the fourth dimension" (for Tralfamadore is outside of time). His explanation is that there are no explanations; the

the moments of our lives are just structured that way.

The answer to Vonnegut's questions also, is that there are no answers. The German guard's "Vy you? Vy anybody?"[14] is later repeated by the Tralfamadorian voice "Why you? Why us for that matter? Why anything? Because the moment simply is."[15] Death is explained with the same nonchalance by the Tralfamadorians. The person is just not in as good state as he was previously; "So it goes."

The death of everything is followed by the phrase "so it goes." This phrase is used at the death of everything, from the most (apparently) insignificant things such as the bugs in Billy's clothes to more important deaths like those of Spot (his dog), the three people that fall over the cliff of the Grand Canyon every year, Jesus Christ, Edgar Derby, Vonnegut's father, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King and so on. Every death then becomes as important or irrelevant as every other death. There is nothing Billy, Vonnegut, or the reader can do about death (or wars or anything) except to say "So it goes."[16] The phrase is an accurate reflection of Billy's method for keeping going: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom always to tell the difference...Among the things Billy could not change were the past, the present and the future."[17] There is not much left for Billy to change, except something outside of time. Billy then invents Tralfamadore which exists outside of time.[18]

This calm acceptance by Billy of everything in life is reflected still further in Vonnegut's repetition of similar descriptive phrases for different situations (this repetition also serves to illustrate the simultaneity of

experience). One example is the above mentioned use by the German and the Tralfamadorian of nearly the same phrase as an explanation for everything. Another repeated phrase is "mustard gas and roses". Vonnegut's dog "doesn't mind the smell of mustard gas and roses"[19] on his breath. In the narrative a drunk, perhaps Vonnegut, calls Billy on the telephone and he "could almost smell his breath - mustard gas and roses."[20] Near the end of the novel Vonnegut uses the image again in reference to the Dresden corpse mine: "the bodies rotted and liquefied, and the stink was like roses and mustard gas. So it goes."[21] The words in the image are reversed for the description of death. The phrase, however, connects the author to the fictional characters, to their similar experiences, and to Dresden and Ilium. It also links Vonnegut's war experiences to his life now; "I drive my wife away" the Vonnegut character says, "with a breath like mustard gas and roses."[22]

"Blue and ivory" is another description, mostly of death, repeated frequently by Vonnegut. As the POW Billy is on the march towards a German railroad yard in World War II he passes "corpses with bare feet that were blue and ivory. So it goes."[23] When Billy passes the Hobo, the dead man's "bare feet were blue and ivory."[24] The adjectives are reversed (as in "roses and mustard gas" to describe death) to describe Billy's living feet: "They were ivory and blue."[25] The reversal of these images is similar to the state of death as explained by the Tralfamadorian: the person is just "in a slightly altered state."

The sum of all the brief images, or telegrams, in the novel yields Vonnegut's and Billy's image of life: there are no reasons for anything in life, especially for death, and, somehow, we must come to terms with this, even if we have to invent a Tralfamadore in another dimension.

Slaughterhouse-Five By George Roy Hill

The film, Slaughterhouse-Five, is a series of flashbacks which end on Tralfamadore. These flashbacks trace the events in the life of Billy Pilgrim which lead him to invent a planet in his fantasies. This invention enables him to live with-and to make some kind of sense out of-his past. The etiology of that early scene of Tralfamadore (in which Montana Wildback asks Billy if he's been time traveling again) is presented throughout the film as a series of short scenes of Billy's World War II experiences and his Ilium experiences ending with the birth of a son on Tralfamadore.

Although several filmmakers make important contributions to the film, Dede Allen's editing is the principal contributant to the filmic success of Slaughterhouse-Five. Her cutting brings continuity-through association of ideas, sights (objects) and sounds-to Billy's various experiences. By examining some of the individual cuts in the film, we can see certain techniques put to use by the editor.

The film opens with Billy typing a letter which describes his experiences: "I have come unstuck in time. I jump back and forth in my life and have no control over where; " and then follows a shot to a "where," in World War II. This cut was on idea, using visual to visual transition (the letter to the war). Another such cut occurs when Edgar Derby reads his letter to "back home" and the next shot is of Billy back home when his son is being busted. Further on in the film there is a cut from the young German guard to Robert, the son, who has become a Green Beret. All of these cuts on idea parallel Billy's life experiences in that the association of the two ideas leads Billy to time travel.

The next type of cut on idea used is from object to object. The camera moves in for a close-up of Roland Weary's boots and, when it moves back again, the boots have changed to slippers and we are no longer in World War II but in Ilium at a different point in Billy's life. The same close-up/pull-away technique is utilized for the cut from the shower fixture at Dresden to the fixture at the country club. A transition from shoes to boots occurs when Billy, in shoes, walks through a door in his house in Ilium and emerges on the other side in wartime Germany in his silver boots. Allen employs the door as a transition object again as the close-up of Billy's doorknocker pulls-away to the door of the Dresden shelter.

A third type of cut used, although not as frquently, is the transition triggered audially. Valencia tells Billy how happy she is that he married her and there is a cut to Germany in which we see two horses harnessed to a wagon (a cut on concentual idea; marriage is a harnessing experience).

Another cutting technique used is an audial image to an audial image transition. Just as the camera merged the boots to shoes and a door to a door, the sound of one scene merges into the sound of the scene to follow. The first occurence of audial to audial transition is a scene in a psychiatric hospital when Billy receives his initial electroshock treatment. There is a sharp sound as the treatment begins, but rather than the expected sound, it is that of a train whistle which is followed by the cut to the German train for transporting the POWs. Another audial cut which uses the same technique occurs during the flight of Billy, his father-in-law and the Ilium optometrists to the optometry convention. The sound of the engines of the plane melts

into the sound of the snow and wind on the mountain, after the accident.

The second kind of audial to audial cut used is the aural transition of ideas from scene to scene. Paul Lazzaro tells someone to "go take a flying fuck." We still see Lazzaro as we hear Valencia's voice say "this is disgusting." Then the visual cut follows and the reference is put into the content of a drive-in movie (although it also fits perfectly into the previous scene). As the scene progresses Valencia scolds her children "don't use that dirty language, Goddammit." This reminds us of her earlier comment, which then becomes ironic. As the scene closes we hear Valencia pleading "Billy" and as the viewer is still watching Billy in Ilium, he hears Derby call "Billy" in Germany. In all these transitions the spectator hears the next scene before he sees it on the screen. The words that comprise the aural overlap represent a continuation of idea and, thus, work in both scenes.

There are four scenes in Slaughterhouse-Five in which time traveling occurs, and in which, at the end of the scene, the audience is at the point of departure minus the actual time of the flashforward sequence. The first of these scenes takes place when Billy is singled out of the line of prisoners and set up for a publicity picture by a German photographer. As the picture is being taken, there is a flashforward to Billy posing in the same manner for his wedding picture. Just as the photographer reaches out to direct Billy's stance there is a transition back to Germany and the photographer finishes the action started by his counterpart in Ilium. At the conclusion of this scene Billy returns to his place in the POW line. The next time this technique is used Billy has buried himself under a blanket in the train with

the other prisoners. The sound of a train rolling down the tracks fades out and as the blanket is lifted, Billy finds himself in the psychiatric hospital with his mother and Eliot Rosewater. After a while Billy almost emerges from under the blanket, but, just as he does, his mother's attention drives him back under. When he next emerges from the blanket, Billy is back on the train. The third time this technique is used, Billy is the only soldier applauding Edgar Derby as Derby walks down an aisle in the POW camp. There is a cut to Billy walking down an aisle at a Lion's Club dinner and the whole room is filled with applause. The montage ends as it began, in Germany. In each of these sequences Billy finishes reliving the scene where he started, in Germany. The filmic suggestion is that Billy feels safer in the far past than in the near past, and further implies, that both times were bad and that he has decided on the lesser of two evils.

The final time this technique is used occurs just after the plane accident. A shot of a doctor walking down a hospital corridor dissolves into one of prisoners walking down a corridor in Dresden (probably in the slaughterhouse) which dissolves back to the hospital corridor, which is now empty. In retrospect, this scene foreshadows two impending disasters, the death of Valencia and the bombing of Dresden. Billy doesn't participate in this scene; thus, the omniscient editor (the silent equivalent of the recording Vonnegut in the novel) leaves us in the near past. Between the first person editing in the film (in which Billy and the viewer time-travel by associative images) and the omniscient editing (in which the flashbacks and flashforwards occur without Billy) the viewer sees the war and Billy on equal

causes of Billy's eventual escape to Tralfamadore.

If the juxtaposition of editing is the most all-pervasive technique used to make the movie, then juxtaposition within a shot is the next-most-used technique. By the use of deep focus the camera becomes objective and lets the viewer decide on what to focus his attention. Hill's inclusion within shots of signs enables us to quickly identify the scene without missing the action or necessitating his stopping it for a close-up of the sign. The scenes involving the Dresden sign in the railroad yard, the Lion's Club banner and the optometry convention banner are scenes in which other action is simultaneously visible. Another scene in which two significant actions occur is the one in Dresden when Edgar Derby is shot. In the foreground, to the left of center, we see the German soldier throw down the porcelain doll, while, simultaneously, in the background center, Edgar Derby is being shot. The deep focus lens is used so that the viewer has a choice of what to concentrate on.

Another technique in the film is the utilization of commentative music.[26] A recurring musical theme is employed mostly in the context of Billy and the Tralfamadorians. One exception occurs when the German prison camp guard races off in search of his girlfriend after the fire-bombing of Dresden. Since the music is used primarily in the context of Tralfamadore, the application of it in this scene suggests that this firebombing is one of the causes of Billy's need to create the planet in the first place. (The use of music in this scene also suggests the unused, Or the Children's Crusade, part of the title of the novel as an underlying theme of the film. Another, verbal, reference to the youth idea is made by the English POW who tells Billy that the Americans are

practically children.)

Another instance of the use of commentative music occurs during the montage sequence of the GI's entering Dresden. The asynchronous Bach concerto, the montage, and the long shots filmed with a blue filter,[21] indeed, create the illusion of Dresden as Oz, as it is described in the novel. The use of subtitles for date and time foreshadows an important event which turns out to be the total destruction of the illusion.

Some techniques are used only once for a specific effect as in the use of the blue filter and of subtitles. One example is the use of stop/motion photography during the rapid descent of the plane. The juxtaposition of this photograph next to the previous shot at normal speed tells us that Billy's prediction of the impending crash was right. There is now no need to show us the crash. Another juxtaposition, this time of sight and sound, occurs as Valencia races into the hospital parking area (like the bomber that comes in on a wing and a prayer in the novel) in a car with no exhaust system, crashes to a stop and falls against the horn of the car. As we first hear her coming, the shot is of a "Hospital Quiet" sign. The noise of this scene is contrasted to the quietness in the juxtaposed flashback following (the quietness of Valencia sleeping when she first gets the car as a birthday present, to her noisy death) of the morning she receives the car. The use of sight and sound juxtaposition next occurs within the scene of Billy's operation. The drops of blood drip in time to the beat of the heart machine. The technique of changing shades of greens on his front lawn and of making Spot (who is plastic material throughout the film) age in the one sequence, accounts for the passage of time in Billy's life and make the comment that after the passage of time everything is still relatively in a status quo. Valencia's behavior adds

to this concept of "nothing changes" by her constantly reappearing with food and continually asking Billy if he wants a snack.

Slaughterhouse-Five ends with Billy and Montana (the substitute fantasy for Valencia, who was always going to lose weight, and who dies) celebrating the birth of their boy (the substitute fantasy for Robert who knocks over gravestones and, ironically, gets "straightened out" by joining the Green Berets) on the planet Tralfamadore (the fantasy world Billy has established in which the explanation for existence is that there are no explanations, and in which he can finally live with his past).

A Comparison of the Novel and Film

Slaughterhouse-Five, by George Roy Hill, is an accurate and successful translation into the film medium of the novel, Slaughterhouse-Five Or The Children's Crusade, by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. As in a consideration of the novel, one must look at the film both as many little telegrams and in its entirety. Although the emphasis is placed differently in the novel and the film, both have the same basic theme or "image of life"; the idea that war, death and all other events in life and man's attempted explanations of them by creating and believing in institutions are equally senseless, and therefore, that we must try to make our own sense of life's mess in whatever way we can. Billy Pilgrim does it by fantasizing Tralfamadore "If it weren't for Tralfamadore, I would need a psychiatrist."

The emphasis in the film is on the flashbacks that explain how Billy

has gotten to Tralfamadore. The story ends on Tralfamadore. In the novel, however, the emphasis is on Vonnegut's anti-war statement, with Tralfamadore as the outcome of one man's resolution of the lack of meaning of life. The title-Slaughterhouse-Five Or The Children's Crusade-the fact that, unlike the film, the novel begins and ends in Dresden, and the numerous literary references (mostly about war) reinforce this emphasis.

This observation on the difference of emphasis in the film and in the novel is not meant to imply that the anti-war approach taken by the book is disregarded in the movie. The idea of children fighting World War II, for instance, is brought up by the Englishman; the German youth, the death of children in the firebombing, and Billy's own son are the visual representations.

Because of the structure of the book (short passages and "telegram-type" sentences), the film, which has a limited amount of time in which to present the same image, must select representative telegrams. An example of the verbal telegram as a condensation of description is the use of one line statements that sum up a character's whole personality. Bertram Copeland Rumford sums up his personality with the single line "The hell with him. Let him write his own book." Edgar Derby's personality is beautifully expressed in the statement "Yes sir, we don't mince words at Boston Trade and Industrial." Paul Lazzaro's personality takes more than a line to describe (the sequence in which he explains his doorknocking technique of murder) but is summed up in the often repeated slogan that "Nobody fucks around with Paul Lazzaro."

Perhaps the films most all-encompassing statement on man's faith in institutions is made in the Cadillac sequence. Although we see the deaths of the car and of Valencia before the scene in which the car is given to her

on her birthday, the flashback serves the purpose of showing the result of man putting faith into institutions. (Suspense is not the point of either the film or the book, thus we do not lose interest in flashing back to the gift scene). This whole sequence is the filmic reconstruction of the passage in the novel[29] describing what happens when someone tries "to construct a life that made sense from things...found in gift shops."[30] In the film sequence Billy tells Valencia to follow the yellow ribbon, "follow the yellow brick road" (a filmic link between the near and far past). This is the second reference to The Wizard of Oz in the film. The first was Billy's analogy of Dresden as a magical land of Oz. Both illusions are destroyed. The ribbon also becomes a symbol of the thread (Billy calls it "a thread" at one point) of life which is cut for Valencia and anyone else who defines themselves in terms of Cadillacs and gift shops (and Derby who defines himself in terms of porcelain figurines).

Other expressions of this sentiment are delivered in one line telegrams. One instance occurs when Weary and a group of American soldiers find Billy in the snow and ask him "Who plays third for the Detroit Tigers?" The irony is present when they can't answer their own question. The cinematic translation of the passage about Mrs. Pilgrim's search for the right church[31] is summed up by her statement to Rosewater "We go to church every Sunday, even though it isn't the church of our choice."

Some of Vonnegut's transitions from sequence to sequence are literally transcribed onto film. On his wedding night Billy walks in and out of the bathroom door and each time he does so he finds himself in a different place, passing through doors making a good filmic transition from scene to scene.

His time traveling from under the blanket in Germany to the bed in the psychiatric hospital is also literally transcribed onto film.

The filmic techniques used in Slaughterhouse-Five gave the movie almost as much breadth and depth as the novel exhibited.[33] This is accomplished through the repetition of certain camera techniques and transitions to give the movie continuity just as Vonnegut used repetition of different literary techniques to give the novel continuity.

By Pill's use of the shot-in-depth, (juxtaposition within the shot) several images can be contained in a single shot. One instance is the presentation of Paul Lazzaro in the background of most scenes that take place in Germany, even those in which he doesn't have a speaking part. He is thus established in the background of Billy's life and his reappearance to murder Pilgrim has been amply foreshadowed.[34] This technique, combined with the various cutting techniques, is one way of filmic inclusion of what would be passages and telegrams in the book. The continuity of associative editing using different cutting methods and the including in the shot of plastic material such as boots, shoes, doors, and sounds, is the filmic equivalent of the author's repetition of different adjectival phrases, creating the novel's sense of continuity. Perhaps the most ingenious filmic translation of all is the use of first person transitions (that Billy makes) and omniscent transitions (those the film and audience make without Billy) to represent the author's interruptions of his narrative. It is the film giving the added dimension of omniscience saying, "I, me, the author of this book."

An excellent testimonial to the authentic translation of the novel is given by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. In his interviews the author claims the film to be precisely what he had in mind when writing the book. The facility of translation of the author's intent from one medium to another is perhaps the result of the influence of the film medium upon the literary medium (eg the writing of more "filmic" novels). The aim of this paper has been to show the similarity of theme in the two works and to describe the successful filmic translation of Vonnegut's book.

Notes

1. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Slaughterhouse-Five Or The Children's Crusade (New York: A Delat Book, 1969) p.76.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid, p. 13; see also the Englishman's speech, p. 91.

5. Ibid, P. 19.

6. Ibid.

7. This double bind of destruction is stated in the two versions of the Jesus myth on pp. 94-5.

8. See the description of the capture Americans, p. 55, for an example.

9. In Ilium, he is as rich as Croesus.

10. Like the Children's Crusade, the Trojan War was not what is appeared to be, and by extension, World War II is not either.

11. In the film, the bum on the train makes a reference to the Iliad, "you think this is bad, you should have been in Troy, winter of..."

12. Vonnegut, p. 37.

13. Ibid, p.38.

14. Ibid, p.79.

15. Ibid, p. 55.

16. We can, however, frown upon people who hasten death and make war, for instance the people Vonnegut describes in Chapter 1.

17. Vonnegut, p. 52.

18. See Tralfamadorian's descriptions of time on pp. 74-5 and 99-100.

19. Vonnegut, p.6.

20. Ibid, p. 63.

21. Ibid, p. 185.

22. Ibid, p. 4.

23. Ibid, p.56.

24. Ibid, p.120.

25. Ibid, p. 62.

26. Contentative music is the music the audience hears but the characters in the film do not.

27. The blue filter could be a symbol for the Blue Danube and thus all the accompanying connotations.

28. In this scene, also, asynchronous sound was used to reinforce the effect of the picture.

29. Vonnegut, p. 157.

30. Ibid, p.33.

31. Ibid, p. 33.

32. Ibid, pp. 107-9.

33. With the single exception of the book's literary references.

34. See above for other instances of objective, deep-focus cinematography.